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KT photo | **Tim Bath**
Rob Burgess, Tribune night editor

House of Burgess: Honor James Foley's memory

Ignore beheading tape, remember his work

By Rob Burgess
Tribune columnist

[**Author's note:** I finished this column Monday evening. On Tuesday, IS released yet another beheading video. The victim was Israeli-American journalist Steven Sotloff, who had been threatened in the previous video of James Foley's beheading. Needless to say, I didn't watch that video, either.]

On Aug. 19, a horrific, 4-minute 40-second video by the Islamic State in Iraq entitled "A Message to America" was uploaded and quickly deleted from

YouTube. In it, a black-clad captor stood in the Syrian desert next to a prisoner in an orange jumper and on his knees.

The victim was later identified as kidnapped American freelance photojournalist James Foley. After a clip of President Barack Obama ordering airstrikes on ISIS, Foley began reading a scripted statement obviously written by someone else, in which he denounced his country.

The disguised fighter then addressed the camera in a London accent, blaming Obama for what was about to occur. A few moments later, Foley's decapitated corpse is shown. The tape ends with the threatening of another captured freelance American journalist, Steven Sotloff.

"The life of this American citizen, Obama, depends on your next decision," the murderer says.

I have seen some pre-beheading still images from the video and read the transcript, but I refuse to watch it. Once, in college, I made the mistake of attempting to view the video of journalist Daniel Pearl's 2002 decapitation by a masked Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. I didn't even make it through the entire clip and what I saw still haunts me. I'll take the word of Foley's parents, John and Diane, who took it upon themselves to watch their son's demise. My deepest, heartfelt sympathies are with them and the rest of James' family and friends.

“Foley’s parents, after avoiding the gruesome video ... finally sat down together to watch the barbaric murder,” reported Bev Ford, Meg Wagner and Larry McShane for the New York Daily News on Aug. 23. “‘We just needed to know,’ dad John Foley said outside the family’s New Hampshire home.”

It’s not just my squeamishness that prevents me from taking in the full horror of the situation. I also don’t want to give the creators the satisfaction. The method, target and marketing of the execution are all meant to be statements.

Foley was held hostage for a total of 635 days. He could have been taken out in private at any time during that period. But these hooded cowards waited until it was politically convenient to fire up their camera to record the gruesome deed. It was meant to make a point. As I said in my last two columns — “First Amendment assault in Ferguson” (Aug. 20) and “Canaries in Ferguson’s coal mine” (Aug. 27) — the targeting of journalists in dangerous places by the prevailing authorities is no accident. It’s meant to interrupt or manipulate the flow of information. And if you see the Fourth Estate being abused, even more detestable treatment of civilians isn’t far behind.

Foley shouldn’t be remembered as a pawn in the Islamic State’s game. Foley dedicated his life to exposing the plight of ordinary human beings in the Middle East. He felt called to conflict reportage, leaving a career as an

instructor with Teach For America in his 30s. He was an incredibly brave man who believed passionately in the importance of his work.

He was actually kidnapped once before and still returned to the front lines. In April 2011, he was held for 44 days in Libya after Moammar Gadhafi loyalists killed fellow photojournalist Anton Hammerl.

“I believe that front-line journalism is important and without these photos and videos and first-hand experience we can’t really tell the world how bad it might be,” Foley told the Boston Globe in a May 27, 2011, video interview after his release.

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